

## The Social Implications of Television

Mary Ann Kearns 1988

excerpt from *The Role of Technology in the Art of Nam June Paik* concerning modifications to technology

One of the pieces in Paik's first exhibition was a television which used a microphone as an input to manipulate and alter the television signal. The piece was subsequently entitled Participation TV, 1965, and was included in Paik's first exhibitions (at the New School for Social Research and Galeria Bonino) in the United States. In 1969 Paik exhibited Participation TV's at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York. This work was comprised of several televisions which included the set with the microphone and, in addition, several TV sets which displayed live, manipulated imagery from several cameras which were trained on the gallery visitors (who became the content of the work). Another early interactive work was Magnet TV, 1965. Developed for an exhibition of his electronic art at the New School for Social Research, Magnet TV involved the use of a large magnet to manipulate the broadcast image or signal. Ironically, Paik later confessed that he had only thought to hold the magnet in front of the screen; it was a spectator at the exhibition who first placed the magnet on top of the set which resulted in startling distortion. (10)

Paik's Video Synthesizer, which he developed from 1969-70 in collaboration with Shuya Abe, is yet another manifestation of his desire to allow the artist/ participant to directly manipulate the video image. In 1965, several years before the synthesizer was realized, Paik envisioned it as an instrument "which anyone could use in his own home, using his increased leisure to transform his TV set from a passive pastime [sic] to active creation." (11) "Communication," said Paik, means the two-way communications. One-way communication is simply a notification ...like a draft call. TV has been a typical case of this non communication and [the] mass audience had only one freedom, that is to turn on or off the TV .... My obsession with TV for the past 10 years has been, if I look back and think clearly, a steady progression towards more differentiated participation by viewers. (12)

### "TV is Contemporary Nature"

When he began working with television in the early 1960's, Paik viewed television as much more than just a communications device. He believed that television was so pervasive in twentieth-century culture that it had become an integral part of the cultural and physical environment akin to nature itself. Like other contemporary artists with whom he was associated and who used elements from the contemporary environment in their work, Paik decided to use television as detritus of present day electronic society. Like Cage who promoted the use of everyday sounds or "noises" in his music, and Rauschenberg who used "refuse" and discarded material in his "combines," Paik used television analogously, as an encompassing element of the twentieth century physical and social environment. Paik likened his television to nature. In typically poetic fashion, he said:

My experimental television is not always interesting but not always uninteresting like nature, which is beautiful, not because it changes beautifully, but simply because it changes. (13)

The idea of appropriating and subverting cultural "icons" was an important principal of Fluxus. As discussed earlier, Fluxus artists wished to destroy the established cultural values which they believed were embodied in such objects as musical instruments. Such objects, Fluxus felt, needed to be liberated from the existing value structure which encased them and which they came to represent. Paik adopted television both as an object and as a new social icon for the same purposes-- to subvert and destroy the values which it enshrined. Just as he had "shattered" the values embodied in musical instruments, often by direct destruction of the instruments themselves, Paik and artist Wolf Vostell began incorporating television into their Fluxus performances as early as 1959. In that year, Paik wrote to Cage of his plans to include a television in one of his performances. At this time Paik and Vostell both gave performances (which Vostell termed "de-collage") in which they would "attack" television sets, disfiguring and destroying them. In 1963, the same year in which Paik exhibited his thirteen TV sets, Vostell exhibited his smashed and altered sets at the Smolin Gallery in New York.

After first using the television for the purpose of destruction, Paik next turned his attention to creative applications. This juxtaposition of destruction and creation, an important Zen principle, indicates the importance of Zen in Paik's art. After first shocking the audience into a new state of awareness, (another Zen and typically Paik tactic), by using television in these unpredictable Fluxus performances, Paik then proceeded along his envisioned course to humanize technology. (14)

Because of the social implications and artistic possibilities television embodied, Paik progressed quickly from employing television as a prop in his performances to making it the very focus of his work. It has remained his focus ever since. By the time Paik decided to use television as an artistic medium, he was already roughly familiar with electronics and television from his exposure to it at the electronic music studio. This familiarity was extremely significant. From the very outset of his “television career” in the early 1960's, Paik was determined to become completely versed in his new electronic medium of television. He completely immersed himself in the study of electronics and engineering.

From his own ideas of mixed-media which were involved in his performances and the writings of the cyberneticist Norbert Wiener, Paik concluded that the area in which he wished to work was the boundary regions between the various media. This, he felt, required a significant knowledge of each. As for television I decided, said Paik, that I would study how it [TV] was made and I discovered it was made of electrons and protons. It made sense to me that I might as well use protons and electrons directly. Then I can have the reality of read made, spiritual reality and scientific reality. (15)

As a new “artist/engineer,” Paik decided that he should be completely competent in the technical aspects of his medium. He envisioned the “unification of the artist and engineer into one person” and announced: I also envisage the day when the collaboration of the artist and engineer will progress into the unification of the artist and engineer into one person. According to my past experience, the best results were achieved through accident and error. Therefore if I give an order to an engineer and if I don't go through all the experiments myself (that is the complicated process of trial and error) I will lose all those precious errors, I will simply get what I want, and miss the disappointments and surprises. I have found that the by-product is often more valuable than the envisioned aim. (16)

For Paik, the challenging and virtually unexplored nature of the television imbued it with an indeterminate quality. Paik has revealed that when he first began to experiment with television, he did not have any preconceived aim. “The first stage of making the work,” he said, “is a technical and intellectual experiment. Second is aesthetic.” (17)

10. Douglas Davis, Art and the Future (NY; EP Dutton, 1973), p67

11. “Projects for Electronic Television” a letter written to the New School for Social Research published in J. Rosebush (ed.) Videa ‘n’ Videology, 1973. n. pag.

12. Sonsbeek catalog, 1971, in J. Rosebush. N. pag.

13. Fluxus Newspaper, 1963, in Rosebush. This assessment of this own work can be readily applied to many of Cage’s works, especially Music of Changes.

14. At his first video exhibit Paik suspended the bloody head of a freshly slaughtered ox over the door as shock device in order, he said, to “get the audience into a oneness of consciousness so they could perceive more”. Gene Youngblood, Expanded Cinema (NY: EP Dutton, 1970) 302.

15. Paik quoted in Nancy Miller, The Color of Time: Video Sculpture by Nam June Paik (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1984), n. pag.

16. Johnathan Price Video Visions: A Medium Discovers Itself. NY: New American Library, 1972. 134.

17. Miller. n. pag.